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Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics

Extension Service Circular 214 April 1935

WHAT IS THE OPPORTUNITY IN AGRICULTURE FOR THE FARM BOY?

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F O R E W O R D

That there are an unusual number of young people on farms is attracting the attention of extension workers everywhere. In this circular an attempt is made to measure the magnitude of this number, point out some of the causes, and raise the question of its significance in an extension program for these young people.

This material indicates that if young people now on the land are to raise the standard of living above that of their parents -

(1) 50 out of every 100 ultimately will have to become entirely dependent upon a nonagricultural occupation.

(2) 25 out of every 100 will live on farms where the resources within the farm will be so small that to maintain a decent living they will have to find a part-time nonagricultural job.

(3) 25 out of every 100 will be on farms where there are resources within the farm to maintain a fairly adequate living.

This means that 3 out of 4 of these young people ultimately will have to develop some skill in nonagricultural occupations. Therefore, they are interested in the outlook for the different nonagricultural occupations as well as in what training and experience are necessary to succeed in these occupations.

Farm young people not only are concerned, therefore, with the kind of a living farming might provide with a fair degree of skill in its operation, but want to know the kind of living the nonagricultural occupations might bring them.

If the information contained in this circular causes you to arrive at the conclusions indicated above, how would you suggest that our present extension program be modified to meet the situation confronting this group of young people?

E. Merritt

Eugene Merritt,
Senior Extension Economist.

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There are now on farms 3,000,000 more people than there would have been under normal conditions; for example, in 1930 there were 2,000,000 farm young people. The great decrease in numbers of people migrating from farms to cities in 1931, 1932, and 1933 brought about this abnormal excess of people on the land.

In dealing with the problems of rural migration, consideration has to be given to the effect of different birthrates on the farm and nonfarm population. The agricultural element in the population not only reproduces enough individuals to take care of agricultural labor replacements, but about one-third more. The urban birthrate, on the other hand, is so low that it lacks over 20 percent of providing sufficient replacements to maintain the population permanently without accession from outside.

Another factor in the adjustment between the farm and urban population is the difference in death rate. The somewhat higher death rate in the cities shortens the productive years of life, probably by 10 percent when compared with farm people.

The increased efficiency of agriculture also has released additional workers to satisfy increasing labor demands in nonfarming occupations.

Under normal farming conditions 40 percent of the boys 15 to 19 years of age are in school and the greater proportion of the remainder are working at home. Of those between 20 and 24 the larger proportion are laborers working for a wage, but over one-fourth of the number have become farm operators, mostly tenants. The majority of those between 25 and 29 are farm

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operators. By the time they have reached their thirtieth to thirty-fourth birthday nearly three-fourths of them are married and have become farm operators.

Male Rural Farm Population, 1930

Male farm population	Age			
	15 to 19 yrs.	20 to 24 yrs.	25 to 29 yrs.	30 to 34 yrs
	Number	Number	Number	Number
Total.....	1,830,526	1,309,335	932,992	833,180
Attending school.....	590,376	41,141	*--	*--
Unpaid family labor....	608,141	239,143	62,032	25,838
Wage earners.....	422,824	573,355	342,408	224,069
Farm owners, tenants, managers and foremen...	49,043	344,438	497,771	575,773
Not employed, not in school.....	*--	*--	*--	*--

Bur. Census data *No data available

The movement of people from the land begins before they are 15 years of age, and is most active among females at an earlier age than among males. Between 20 and 34 years of age it is heaviest among both sexes. The slowing down of the movement from farms has caused a marked increase in the number of young people on the land. The backward flow from the cities apparently has been principally by these age groups. The increase in farm population from both these causes is adding to the number in the unpaid family-labor classes and probably is displacing many farm laborers working for wages.

Under normal conditions the close correlation between the percentage of young men who are married and the percentage who are farm operators indicates that the often-heard expression, "When I married I looked around for a farm to operate", is largely true. The urge to marry has not been affected materially by the depression, but the number of marriages has decreased temporarily. The rise in birthrate in 1934 in many States probably is due largely to consummation of postponed marriages. The greatly increased number of young people of a marriageable age now on farms, and the increasing number that will reach that age in the next 5 or 10 years indicate that increased pressure to acquire farms may develop in the near future.

Percentage of Farm Population Married, 1930

Ages	Native whites of native parents		All classes	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
15 to 19 years..	2.2	14.6	2.2	14.7
20 to 24 years..	28.5	57.3	29.2	57.0
25 to 29 years..	63.4	81.1	61.9	80.3
30 to 34 years..	78.9	88.4	76.9	87.7

Bur. Census data.

Today on farms there are probably between 300,000 and 400,000 young men who are married and who under normal conditions would have become farm operators if the opportunity had been afforded. If this trend continues, 2,000,000 more males over 20 years of age will be on farms in 1940 than there were in 1930. If the proportion of males of these ages operating farms in 1940 is the same as in 1930, there will be over 1,000,000 more farms in the Nation by 1940. These facts raise a question as to the kind of a living to which these young people on the land can look forward.

Trend of Young Farm Operators

In the 20 years prior to 1930, the total number of white farmers who were under 35 years of age decreased by over one-fourth. The number of share tenants showed a marked increase, the number of owners and cash tenants a decrease. These data seem to indicate that in these 20 years it was increasingly difficult for a young man on the farm to get a foothold on the agricultural ladder, and that the time between steps was lengthening.

Numbers of Farm Operators (White) Under 35 Years of Age

Operators	Under 25 years of age			25 to 34 years of age		
	1930	1920	1910	1930	1920	1910
All owners.....	43,331	80,961	91,010	317,478	534,868	585,562
Cash tenants...	23,437	35,848	55,502	102,016	147,745	178,647
Share tenants..	201,968	171,687	179,364	445,667	442,096	407,928
Managers.....	2,730	5,300	4,698	10,753	17,523	15,315
Total.....	271,466	293,796	330,574	875,914	1,142,232	1,187,452

Bur. Census data.

This decrease in number of farm operators in the younger age group has been accompanied by an increase in the older age groups.

Standard of Living on Farms

In discussing the problem confronting these young people the terms "inadequate", "minimum essential", or "mere subsistence" type of farming are used frequently. In this discussion the meaning of the terms, as interpreted by the home economist, is used. An "inadequate" or "subsistence" budget to them means a family budget which does not enable a farm family to send their children to school beyond the grades, to save, to take out life insurance, or to have an automobile without reducing the other phases of living below the subsistence level; a budget that cannot provide them with adequate medical care. A family on such a budget, because of shortage of funds has a low clothing standard. Home economists consider as mainly in this class those wage earning families that have less than $1,000 a year for living. When such factors are applied to a farm family, their budget would be somewhat similar to the one indicated on page 6. The data shown in this table were gathered in three different ways, from white farm families but all within the same county. These subsistence families produced the maximum of food and feed, yet it took between $200 and $300 in cash to provide the things for living that they consider they should not have to do without. Farm-management records showed that if after paying farm expenses this sum was not available, these things were purchased anyway and debts tended to increase.

In 1929, 3,000,000, or 49 percent, of all the farms involved produced less than $1,000 worth of products for sale. These farms contributed only 11 percent of the total value of farm products sold. Of this number 490,000 were farms where the value of the products used on the farm exceeded the value of the products sold. About 350,000 were farms where the operator was a part-time farmer who worked 150 days or more a year at other occupations. Over a million were cotton farmers. In addition to these types there were over a million others on farms scattered throughout the East and Middle West, producing less than $1,000 worth of products for sale. Probably more than one-half of the young people now on farms reside on the "subsistence" type of farm.

A Typical "Inadequate" Farm-Home Budget

Item	Home survey	Fairly adequate farm-home budget	Farm survey	Farm and home Economic conferenc
Cash expenditure required:	Dollars		Dollars	Dollars
Food.....	61	(200)	77	$35 to $50
Clothing.....	73	(200)	70	80
Education.....	56	(60)	48	35
Recreation....	25	(60)	9	15
Health.....	13	(50)	23	25
Church.....	15	(40)		15
Fuel and light	14	(50)		12
Furniture.....	3	(40)		20
Personal.....	5	(40)		15
Life insurance			34	
Total cash....	265	(740)	261	250
Furnished by farm:				
Garden.....			89	
Fruits.....			31	
Poultry.....			48	
Dairy.....			96	
Pork.....			74	
Beef.....			5	
Corn meal.....			18	
Sirup.....			11	
Total food....		(360)	372	400 to 650
House rent....		(360)	127	130
Fuel.....		(40)	31	35
Total furnished by farm.....		(760)	530	565

The home survey was conducted by members of all the demonstration clubs in the county. The farm-survey data were taken from individual farm-management records. The farm and home economic-conference data were based upon what farm women attending a county-wide conference indicated were minimum essentials, and the local cost of these essentials. The fairly adequate budget was prepared in a similar economic conference and is approximately what might be considered an average farm budget for United States farms as a whole in comparatively prosperous years. Fairly adequate farm-home budget figures have been inserted in order that comparisons may be made.

A large number of crop reporters who are white owner operators, each year report their farm receipts and expenses to the United States Department of Agriculture. Out of their receipts have been deducted most of their farm expenses and a figure arrived at and designated as "net result." "Net result" is what the farm family have left to pay for living expenses, interest, and farm improvements. A comparison of the percentage having a "net result" of less than $1,000 for 1929 with more recent years will give a partial index of trend in the number of subsistence farm families. These data show that in 1929, which is also typical of the previous four years, 5 percent of these white owner operator families had less than $1,000 to pay for family living, interest, and farm improvements; in 1931, 75 percent; in 1932, 85 percent; and in 1933 over 80 percent. The majority must have been in the "inadequate" or "subsistence" group. The relative number of white tenants and colored farmers on this type of farms probably was even higher than among the white owner operators. If this change in ratio is indicative of the change in the mere subsistence type of farms for 1933, the number probably has increased from 3,000,000 to 4,500,000. However, the change in the purchasing power of the dollar makes a comparison in terms of goods difficult.

Percentage of White Owner-Operator Farmers Obtaining "Net Result"

"Net result"	1925-29 average	1929	1933
Dollars	Percent	Percent	Percent
$499 or less...	31.46	31.13	62.29
500 - 999....	22.13	22.63	19.18
1000 - 1499....	15.02	14.89	7.82
1500 - 1999....	9.85	10.35	3.28
2000 plus.....	21.54	21.00	7.43

Bur. Agr. Econ. data.

Part-Time Employment

The number of farmers who in 1929 reported employment during the year at jobs not connected with the farm was 1,900,000, or over 30 percent of the total number of farm operators. The average was 100 days. How much this opportunity to supplement farm income has changed is not known, but reports indicate that in many instances such opportunity to supplement income is lost.

Days Employed off the Farm as Reported by Farm Operators, 1929

Days	Number of operators	Number of days	Average number of days
Under 25.....	516,102	6,243,742	12
25 to 49.....	328,068	10,657,622	32
50 to 74.....	217,032	12,351,723	57
75 to 99.....	118,427	9,924,608	84
100 to 149.....	183,080	20,028,067	109
150 to 199.....	143,485	23,279,486	162
200 to 249.....	129,400	26,727,362	207
250 and over.....	267,304	80,655,778	302
Total.....	1,902,898	189,868,388	100

Bur. Census data

In areas where large numbers of farm operators employed off the farm for a considerable time, as in New England, the Middle Atlantic, and the Pacific States, loss of work is a real handicap. When this loss is accompanied by a low price for agricultural products it imposes a double handicap upon such families.

Agricultural Land

It requires from 285 to 290 million acres of crop land to supply our present population with the food products they consume. If we add to this another 20 to 25 million acres needed to supply nonfood products, we obtain a total of 305 to 315 million acres for domestic food and nonfood requirements. If then we accept our 5-year average crop acreage (1928-32) of 360 to 370 million acres to be a reasonable measure of our effective crop area, we have a difference of 50 to 55 million acres.

In the period from 1925 to 1929, when our population was about 5 percent smaller than it is at present, we actually exported the products of 60 to 70 million acres. During the depression period 1931-33 exports decreased and the products of 40 or 50 million acres were shipped abroad.

If we take a long point of view and allow for an increasing population, we probably shall need all this crop area for which there is now no immediate prospective market, and some in addition if we increase our exports above the present level. If we continue to export cotton and other products we would need 25 years hence, a total harvested crop area of 370 to 390 million acres, which is somewhat larger than the recent harvested acreage.

Changes in Number of Farm Units in the Past

Following previous depressions there were available large areas of agricultural lands which were not being used for agricultural purposes. We find that following the depression of the 1870's between censuses there was an increase of 50 percent in the number of farms, and following the depression of the nineties an increase of nearly 26 percent. In both of these periods the land area in farms increased nearly one-third.

Changes in Numbers of Farms and of Land in Farms

Year	Farms		Total land in farms	
	Number	Percentage of increase over previous census	Acres	Percentage of increase over previous census
1860.....	2,044,077	41.1	407,213,000	38.7
1870.....	2,659,985	30.1	407,735,000	0.1
1880.....	4,008,907	50.7	536,082,000	31.5
1890.....	4,564,641	13.9	623,219,000	16.3
1900.....	5,737,372	25.7	838,592,000	34.6
1910.....	6,361,502	10.9	878,798,000	4.8
1920.....	6,448,343	1.4	955,884,000	8.8
1930.....	6,288,648	2.5-	986,771,000	3.2

Bur. Census data.

Size of Farm Unit

The number of farms in the New England, Middle Atlantic, and eastern North Central States was decreasing up to 1930. The decrease was less rapid in the larger sized units. In the South the number of farms remained constant, but the number of small-sized farms increased enough to offset a decrease in the large-sized farms. In the western North Central States there was a slight increase in the total number of farms, but a decrease in the farms of 20 to 174 acres. The size of the farm unit from which the young farmer can choose generally is fixed by the difficulty of combining the present units into what might be a farm of more efficient size. The past trends in number of farm units of different sizes in various agricultural areas indicate the probable size of units from which the more desirable standard of living might be obtained in the future.

Based upon the foregoing facts we might make four different assumptions as to what might happen to these rural youth:

Four Major Assumptions

First assumption

That all young men stay on the land and become dependent upon agriculture for their living. By 1940 this probably would mean that we should have a million

more young men clamoring to become or who already had become farm operators and about a half million more farm laborers, mostly at home on their parents' farms. There would be an equal number of young women. This would mean an increase in number of people dependent upon the return from agricultural products. In 1930 nearly 25 percent of the people in the United States were dependent upon agriculture. From 1925 to 1929, which were considered comparatively prosperous years for agriculture, the proportion of the national income that went to agriculture was 10 to 12 percent. In 1930 and 1932 it is estimated that the proportion had fallen to 7 or 8 percent. Since farm people are making their fair contribution to the Nation's goods in the form of raw materials, produce an excess of potential laborers, and contribute more than their share to good citizenship, it might be assumed that the normal proportion of the Nation's income due them should be about 25 percent. However the proportion of the national income in 1925 to 1929 has been considered more nearly attainable. If all the people now on the land and the normal increase for the next 5 years should stay there, a standard no better than in 1930 to 1932 might become permanent.

Second assumption

If it is assumed that all the young people now on farms stayed there and that the standard of living for the group as a whole was maintained or raised, they would require 3 to 4 times as many days at jobs not connected with a farm operated as in 1929 and these part-time jobs would have to be provided largely in the densely populated farming areas where few such opportunities exist at present. This would mean that part-time jobs would have to be furnished to an extent that would be equivalent to the amount of time devoted to various occupations in area with populations as large as in New York City.

Third assumption

Another assumption might be that these people will stay on the land and that an effort will be made to provide them with an adequate living through increased agricultural exports. If these people earned a living the equivalent to that enjoyed in 1925 to 1929 it would mean that they would have to produce agricultural products coming from 60 million acres of corn, wheat, cotton, and other crops. This would mean that about 100,000,000 acres of crops were produced for export, directly or indirectly.

Fourth assumption

The fourth assumption might be that industry would absorb the excess farm population. Many of those who are studying the industrial outlook feel that by 1940 industry will have fully regained its former impetus, and that (a) more people will be enjoying the kind of goods already produced, (b) there will be increased efficiency in production and lower prices and (c) many new goods may be brought into existence. If this assumption gives a clue to what farm young people are facing, it will mean that for at least 5 years and maybe for 10 they will be backed up on the farms and the migration from the farm to the city will not attain its normal magnitude until after 1940, but by 1950 all the surplus people now on the land will be needed by decentralized industries or by industries located in large cities. The United States has the resources,

plants, and people available in this country to raise the standard of living to new high levels. Just what adjustments finally will be made between agriculture and industry are not known. It is hoped that they will be such as to raise the standard of living in both groups.

What happens in the nonagricultural occupations ultimately will determine the number of men dependent upon agriculture and the standard of living on farms. The challenge before the extension worker is, to help to prepare the young people now on the land to be ready to fill the nonagricultural jobs as they become available, or to settle on farms where there is a possibility of earning a decent living, either entirely from the farm or by supplementing farming with a part-time nonagricultural job.

Farm Population

Year	Number, Jan. 1	Persons leaving farms for cities	Persons arriving at farms from cities	Net Movement	
				Farms to cities	Cities to farms
1920...	31,614,269	896,000	560,000	336,000	
1921...	31,703,000	1,323,000	759,000	564,000	
1922...	31,768,000	2,252,000	1,115,000	1,137,000	
1923...	31,290,000	2,162,000	1,355,000	807,000	
1924...	31,056,000	2,068,000	1,581,000	487,000	
1925...	31,064,000	2,038,000	1,336,000	702,000	
1926...	30,784,000	2,334,000	1,427,000	907,000	
1927...	30,281,000	2,162,000	1,705,000	457,000	
1928...	30,275,000	2,120,000	1,698,000	422,000	
1929...	30,257,000	2,081,000	1,604,000	477,000	
1930...	30,169,000	1,723,000	1,740,000		
1931...	30,585,000	1,469,000	1,683,000		17,000
1932...	31,241,000	1,011,000	1,544,000		214,000
1933...	32,242,000	1,178,000	951,000	227,000	533,000
1934...	32,509,000				

Farm Operators Reporting Days of other Occupations

States	Operators	Days
	Percent	Average no.
United States.....	30.3	100
New England.....	44.7	142
Middle Atlantic.....	34.9	125
East North Central.....	28.6	105
West North Central.....	23.6	81
South Atlantic.....	31.8	108
East South Central.....	32.7	86
West South Central.....	29.2	81
Mountain.....	33.2	118
Pacific.....	37.2	145

Ages of Farm Operators

Year	Operators under 25	Operators 25 to 34	Operators 35 to 44	Operators 45 to 54	Operators 55 to 64	Operators 65 and over	Operators whose ages are not reported	Total
				ALL OPERATORS				
1930	371,679	1,049,052	1,452,425	1,459,959	1,064,034	676,374	215,125	6,288,648
1920	383,680	1,333,020	1,587,519	1,482,494	993,771	583,679	84,187	6,448,347
1910	419,330	1,413,876	1,571,469	1,432,707	947,524	554,570	22,026	6,361,502

Ages of White Operators

Year	Operators Under 25	Operators 25 to 34	Operators 35 to 44	Operators 45 to 54	Operators 55 to 64	Operators 65 and over	Operators whose ages are not reported	Total
1930	271,466	875,914	1,259,651	1,247,069	930,178	603,961	184,339	5,372,578
1920	293,796	1,142,232	1,363,044	1,246,559	872,861	507,167	72,795	5,498,454
1910	330,574	1,187,452	1,344,237	1,243,727	832,312	485,625	16,692	5,440,619

CHILDREN BORN PER 100 WIVES, CLASSIFIED ACCORDING TO OCCUPATION OF THE HUSBANDS, SELECTED COUNTIES, CENSUS OF 1910*

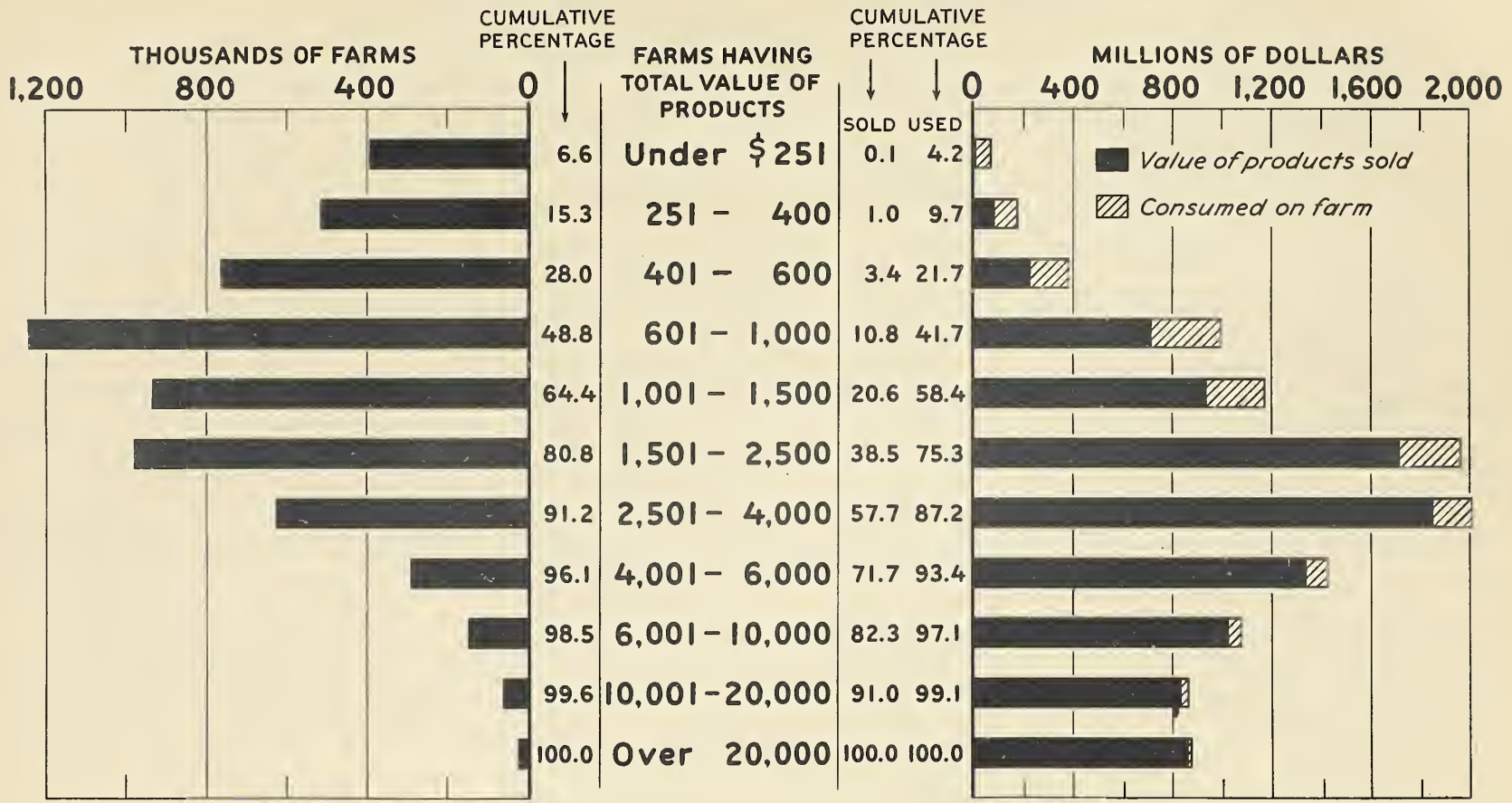
*COMPILED FROM CENSUS OF 1910 BY MILBANK MEMORIAL FUND

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

NEG. 27633

BUREAU OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

Estimated Value of Products Sold from Farms Classified into Value of Products Groups, United States, 1929



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